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ABSTRACT

This booklet offers a framework to help administrators understand the campus environment for minorities, and describes an approach to collecting the information needed to monitor change in that climate with an emphasis on the experiences and perceptions of minority students on campus and the need they express for a more hospitable campus. Following an introduction, the first of three sections offers questions for presidents and senior administrative staff designed to focus thinking on the central issues of campus climate, and to provide a series of talking points for further conversation. The questions are grouped under the following topics: (1) recruitment of minority students; (2) at-risk students; (3) retention of minority students; (4) employee training; (5) minority participation in institutional life; (6) educational programs; (7) non-academic programs; and (8) institutional policy issues. The second section proposes a student program designed to help the institution make the campus environment better for all students and offers questions for a structured student interview. The third section offers actual student comments on campus environment in the following areas: (1) positive attitudes; (2) ignorance and insensitivity; (3) isolation and alienation; (4) stereotyping; (5) overload; (6) too few role models; (7) minority concerns; (8) group relations; (9) white student feelings; and (10) the importance of financial aid. Concluding comments are included. (JB)

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MINORITIES ON CAMPUS

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Understanding Campus Climate

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An approach to supporting student diversity

National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
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MINORITIES ON CAMPUS

Understanding Campus Climate

An approach to supporting student diversity

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Introduction

When it comes to the participation of minority students, faculty, and staff, most independent colleges and universities in the United States share at least two characteristics:

- They have made special efforts in recent years to increase their minority recruitment and retention and to improve their campus climate for people of color.
- Whatever their level of accomplishment, they would like to do better.

In the spring of 1989, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) set out to help its members do better. The NAICU/NIICU Task Force on Minority Participation in Independent Higher Education began to look at ways to assess and improve the campus climate; at ways to develop effective partnerships with other colleges and universities or with elementary and secondary schools; at short- and long-term strategies to increase minority faculty; and at lessons to be learned from historically black and other minority institutions.

This paper offers a framework to help administrators understand the campus environment for minorities, and an approach to collecting the information needed to monitor change in that climate. The emphasis is on the experiences and perceptions of minority students on campus, and the need they express for a more hospitable campus. The strategies offered can be applied at any institution. It is hoped that this paper will help the president and senior administrators to better plan for institutional change that supports campus diversity.

Before it is possible to understand the campus climate, we must know just what we mean by the term itself. The campus climate is the total effect of the environment—institutional and community—that influences the experience of those who work and study at a college or university. It can be hospitable or distant, supportive or threatening, understanding or ignorant, good-spirited or resentful. In fact, it can be all of these things at the same time, and more.

Why should colleges and universities be concerned about the climate for minority participation? The reasons are both altruistic and practical—because it's the right thing to do and because it's in the institution's self-interest. Postsecondary education is the catalyst for personal success in America. For those individuals who have been denied full access to participation in society, a college education provides that access. As the nation's population becomes more diverse over the next decade, the opportunity for higher education to ensure the future of the next generation of citizens will be more necessary than ever.

At the same time, there are significant benefits to the institution that is prepared to serve these students. Enrollment can be stabilized by recruiting and enrolling students from underrepresented groups. The intellectual and social life of the campus can become more invigorating and appealing to all the members of the campus community. External funding sources are more willing to support colleges and universities that make a commitment to the underserved. The advantages to the institution that is prepared to adapt are myriad, but the time to begin to establish a participatory environment is today, not tomorrow.

The campus climate is about perception—about how it feels to be in that community, not simply what happens. It is important to note that the campus climate will be experienced differently from person to person. If we are to change the current campus climate, we must remember that change is created and experienced by individuals. At some point, the success of solutions implemented in response to group needs will depend on the individuals in that group and others.

Questions for Decision Makers

Because the campus climate is so complex a phenomenon, it is often difficult to know if change is needed, where to begin, and what factors offer the greatest opportunity for changing the status quo. Any hope for the success of this assessment process requires active presidential leadership and involvement. The following questions will help focus the president's thinking on the central issues of campus climate, and provide a series of talking points for the senior administrative staff. In other words, ask these questions of yourself and those who make campus policy with you. The attempt to reach consensus on the answers in the campus policymaking group may be an enlightening experience.

Recruitment of Minority Students

1. Does the institution have a program specifically to recruit minority students?
2. Are there sufficient numbers of people with multicultural backgrounds participating in the recruitment effort?
3. Does the institution's literature reflect and accurately project the multi-ethnic commitment of the institution?

4. Is the effort to recruit minority students evaluated regularly?

5. Does the evaluation of minority recruitment consider all the proper institutional components of minority recruiting, including the financial resources available for the program?

At-Risk Students

The term "at risk" often refers to a student's inadequate preparation for college. However, being at risk can be the result of isolation or exclusion felt by a student in response to an inhospitable campus environment. Students who come from underrepresented groups are not automatically at risk. The following questions have implications beyond the campus minority community, and do not necessarily apply to all the members of that community.

1. Are there adequate processes to identify at-risk students?

2. Are there specific retention strategies to deal with at-risk students?

3. Is there clear accountability and regular reporting regarding programs for at-risk students?

4. How are at-risk students encouraged to take advantage of special opportunities made available to them by the institution?

5. What proportion of at-risk students on your campus are on academic warning or probation, and how does this compare with the performance of majority students?

Retention of Minority Students

1. Are retention statistics for both minority and majority students available for each class?

2. How do the graduation rates for minority and majority students compare, including time to degree completion?

3. Does the amount of financial aid available to minority students reflect the level of need of these students? Are minority

students more likely to receive loans and/or less likely to receive institutional student aid than majority students?

Employee Training

1. Are there training programs or opportunities for administrators, staff, and faculty to develop increased sensitivity to the unique needs, interests, and cultural backgrounds of the institution's minority populations?

2. Are there sufficient incentives (e.g., release time, payment of fees, consideration in promotion and salary decisions) for employees to engage in such training?

3. Does the faculty development program specifically address race, ethnicity, and gender?

Minority Participation in Institutional Life

1. Are minorities adequately represented on the board of trustees, search committees, institutional task forces (other than those with an emphasis on minority issues), and other institutional policymaking committees?

2. Do the hiring practices of the institution reflect a commitment to multi-ethnic education?

3. Do majority students join minority organizations? Do minority students participate in organizations that consist mostly of majority students?

Educational Programs

1. Does the curriculum provide opportunities for students to read, study, and celebrate their own culture and those of other social groups?

2. Does the curriculum take a comprehensive approach to ethnicity, race, and gender, or are these issues confined to ethnic studies or women's studies courses?

3. Is a regular, formal approach used to monitor the classroom environment in order to ensure a healthy climate for all students in all academic programs?

4. Do minority students feel that they are made to speak for their entire race or cultural group?

5. Are minority students ever made to feel incompetent in their learning ability or academic performance, or that less is expected of them?

Nonacademic Programs

1. How well do students of diverse racial and cultural groups interact on the campus (residence halls, food services, campus organizations, intramural sports, etc.)?

2. Are connections with local minority communities developed or encouraged? Do any campus programs take advantage of those connections?

Institutional Policy Issues

1. Is there a grievance policy in place to provide for hearing and resolving minority student complaints of discrimination and prejudice?

2. Are there alternative conflict resolution processes available to minority students (ombudsperson, designated mediators, student mediators, etc.)?

3. Is there an institutional policy against harassment of students based on race, ethnicity, or gender? Is it enforced?

4. Is there a committee in place to study and monitor minority involvement in all aspects of the institution, covering key areas such as recruitment, retention to graduation for students or tenure for faculty, classroom climate, and all aspects of the environment outside the classroom?

5. Are there rewards for the staff and faculty to encourage participation in minority organizations on campus or work with minority students?

These questions are a good place for campus policymakers to start assessing the campus climate. The questions are not exhaustive, and the wording is open to change. The conceptual approach and process that led to their development, however, are most important. If the senior administration sets a tone for frank and open discussion, the effort to influence institutional norms has already begun.

Using Structured Student Interviews

Discussions at the senior policy level on campus are essential but not sufficient to understand the campus climate for minorities. It is important to ask those individuals directly about their experience. The largest minority population on most campuses is found in the student body. The following protocol for structured interviews is intended to provide some of the necessary insights to supplement discussions of the environment for minority students on campus.

Each year a sample of entering minority students should be asked to commit to participating over the course of their enrollment in a program designed to help the institution make the campus environment better for all students. Participation in the program would require a commitment of about six hours each semester. Two of the hours would be spent in an interview, and another two hours in a focus group. The final two hours could be social or recreational.

Let's imagine an interview format for the end of the first year. This could be the second of eight interviews over a four-year period, or the third of nine if a baseline interview is included at the start of the first year. Here is a series of questions for the interview.

1. Describe a significant experience of your first year. Why does it stand out? What were the greatest surprises of the year?

2. Who are the friends with whom you spend the most time? Where do you see them, and how frequently? Do you eat meals together? How do these people help you? How do you help them? To what extent are academics an aspect of your relationships?

3. Who matters to you here? Whom do you approach for help with academic matters, social concerns, other concerns? How did you meet them, and how frequently do you see them? What kind of relationships do you have with them? Have you changed sources of help during the course of the year? If so, why?

4. How would you describe your approach to academic work? What are you studying? What academic subjects interest you? What aspects of your academic work excite you or put you off? How does your approach to academic work differ, if at all, from that of students you view as academically successful? How does it differ, if at all, from students you view as academically unsuccessful? Why do you approach academic work your way? How did your way evolve?

5. For whom does your performance here matter? Why?

6. Did your expectations of yourself or of the school change during your first year? If so, how? Did your expectation of how well you would do here change? Has the school asked something of you that you did not anticipate? If so, did you feel alone in this, or was it a common experience among your associates?

7. Did you have to shift gears in coming here? How? Were you less challenged or more challenged than you had anticipated? Have you had academic difficulties? If so, what kinds? If you had difficulties, when did you first recognize them? Have you developed new strategies for dealing with these difficulties? If

so, how would you describe them? Have they been successful? If not, why not? How would you assess the resources offered in the first year to people who feel they are not doing as well academically as they would like? Have you encountered people who have been particularly helpful to you? Who were they, and how did you find them?

8. Do you think your academic performance will change over the next three years? If so, how? If so, to what do you attribute the change?

9. What courses have you taken? Why did you select them? Are there courses you have wanted to take, but have avoided? Why? Who have been your best teachers? What qualities did you appreciate most in them? Who have been your worst teachers? What characteristics of theirs did you dislike most? Are there courses, professors, or departments that are particularly attractive or unattractive to members of your group? Why?

At this point, a brief parenthetical commentary may be useful. The question of curriculum deserves special attention. Minority students strongly express their needs to see their group accurately and sensitively portrayed in the curriculum—in separately identified courses and through consideration of various races and cultures throughout the curriculum. Part of this is a need for validation of their history and recognition of their achievements and contributions. However, it is also important to provide opportunities to try out academic tools in a familiar context. Students need to experience a critique of their beliefs and culture as an intellectual challenge that they themselves ultimately control, rather than as an insult or threat to their personal dignity.

A professor in a liberal arts college once told an entering freshman class that the primary purpose of the freshman "great books" course was to subvert the values that they had brought from home. In other words, he cared about the values they had brought, and he intended to engage them. Minority students who fail to find their

experiences and related values addressed in the curriculum miss the opportunity to confront the challenge from a position of strength and comfort. Without such an experience, minority students may believe that they are not seen by their professors as even worthy of subversion.

10. How have you changed since you arrived? What has brought about the changes? What was the influence of any special affiliations (fraternities, club memberships, sports, extra-curricular activities, community activities, etc.)? How would you describe your academic, career, and other life plans when you arrived? Have any of them changed? How, and under what influences? To whom do these changes matter?

11. Who are the people here with whom you talk about the topics covered in this interview? Do you talk with individuals from other groups than your own? Does this institution provide you with structured opportunities to become familiar with the views of other people and groups on these topics?

12. What negative experiences have you had here, in specific places and activities, such as the classroom, extracurricular activities, residence halls, dining halls, and social events, that have affected you adversely? Describe the experiences. Interpret them. Describe the effects.

These questions are designed to elicit significant information about how students fare at the institution and how their self-understanding evolves in the institutional environment. While none of the questions refer to the student's minority status, it is assumed that students would be asked to explain how, if at all, their responses were related to their minority identity.

When focus groups are employed, these groups could use the topic guide developed for NAICU as part of this project. The use of focus groups and the topic guide are discussed in a companion piece of the Minorities on Campus series entitled *Thank You for Asking*. In addition, the groups could be asked questions such as the following:

1. What do this institution and its people (faculty, students, staff) do that affects you and your group adversely?
2. What do this institution and its people do that is beneficial to you and your group?
3. What has been done in the past semester or year to improve things? How effective were the steps taken? What should have been done?
4. What resources exist to help you and your group? How effective are they? How could they be improved? What other resources should be available? Why aren't they?
5. What does the institution do to support students who come from mixed ethnic or racial homes? Do you have trouble finding a place for yourself in campus life?

Characteristics of the Campus Climate

I've never had a teacher I could look up to and say, "I want to be like him or her." I would want a teacher of my background and culture so I could look up to that person and say, "Wow!"

—Focus group participant

Recent focus group discussions on independent campuses identified several characteristics of the campus climate. There are recurring themes that emerge at virtually all institutions and across a variety of groups.

It should be emphasized at the outset that even in discussions that were designed to uncover and learn about the challenges of race relations, there is clear evidence that students from diverse backgrounds often live together in harmony on our college and university campuses. The following comments are typical of the positive attitudes expressed in the focus groups.

Once you start getting involved with what's going on on campus, you start to feel like you belong here and what's positive (for me) is a sense of accomplishment for myself.

> Being here for four years, just to be able to meet people from other backgrounds and get to know people has been a good experience for me, learning about other cultures.
>
> [Before coming to this college,] I couldn't see how important it was to have a mixed population; I only thought about getting a great education. . . . When you get here you see how important it is.

Yet in reading transcripts from the same focus groups conducted for the task force, it becomes clear that almost regardless of size, type, or location of the institution, there is a widely prevailing cluster of troubling attitudes that characterize relationships among the racial and ethnic groups that share our campuses. The same themes of confusion and tension tend to recur, and their prevalence across the country suggests a common set of concerns that leaders need to address.

One authority on interethnic relations commented, "All of us should think of ourselves as 'recovering ethnocentrics' as we endeavor to understand and to overcome the differences which set groups apart and prevent the campus from becoming a true community." In trying to assess and better understand the campus climate, another authority noted that "what we have are the multilayered ambiguities of people [most of them quite young] dealing with self and dealing with others." He added that we sometimes may be too quick to label as "racial" the difficulties that naturally arise when persons of different backgrounds find the need to interact. What is often described as tension may be more accurately understood as confusion. Most students, regardless of racial or ethnic group, grow up in communities and schools that are homogeneous. When they reach college, they suddenly find themselves in a heterogeneous environment, and often without the assistance required for the transition they must make.

Regardless of how we classify them, the reality is that there are discernible conditions that seem to predominate on campus, and that are repeatedly cited by students and staff members as primary sources of the stress and conflict they experience. The dominant themes that tend to characterize the campus climate at present are:

ignorance on the part of whites about other ethnic groups, and insensitivity about their circumstances, feelings, and needs

isolation and alienation of minority groups from the larger campus community

stereotyping by whites about minority group attributes and behavior

overload of the too few minority students and staff members with special responsibilities linked to their role and ethnicity

too few role models on the faculty for minority students

inclination of institutions to deal with minority needs and concerns through *a specially created office,* rather than broadly and systematically throughout the institution

the *separation/integration dilemma* of students of color—the strongly felt need for a dormitory, special group, or association of their own as a support base, which tends to compound the problem of separateness

bewilderment, confusion, and sometimes resentment and anger on the part of white students over what they perceive as the excessive sensitivity of minority students and their tendency to ascribe racist motives to actions that arise more from ignorance or perplexity

At least some, and more commonly all, of these conditions typically are seen by underrepresented minority students as characterizing the climate on college and university campuses today so far as racial and ethnic interactions are concerned. The following excerpts from focus group discussions provide evidence of the challenge that campuses face as they strive to achieve interracial and interethnic understanding, respect, and harmony.

Ignorance and Insensitivity

I thought that at high school you're going to feel racism, but that at college people are smarter, everyone's intelligent. One time I

heard someone mention blacks and spics aren't like other people. . . . I asked him if he knows where the word "spic" originated, and [told him] that it shows no respect for Latin American people, it shows no respect for me (and he said it in my room). He said, "Well, I just didn't know." That's when he made me aware that college isn't a place of enlightened and educated people.

White students here are so ignorant about my race. They're not mean like some whites back home, just curious. They ask about the strangest things—my hair, clothes, music.

You want to laugh? Last year I cut my hand in front of some people and I was bleeding. . . . They said, "Oh my God, your blood's red!"

We were watching the news once and one girl says, "I really hate the way niggers act." Then she says, "I don't mean you!" But I kind of fit into that category.

The person goes, "I hate niggers!" and he looks at me and he goes, "No, no, she's not a nigger, I know her. She's a Negro," and I said, "What's the difference?"

Isolation and Alienation

I still can't believe to this day that this happened. . . . We had to discuss our paper topics in class. [I told them my topic was the] lack of Latino representation at [this college]. . . . Once that was said, the whole class was quiet, like I said something that was taboo. I felt uncomfortable being the only Latino person there, and there was only one other multiracial person in the room. . . . A guy says, "What do you propose we do, lower academic standards?"

[Besides the social scene,] the other thing I find very hard is being the only black person in class. . . . When class is over with, I try to hang around and get to know the kids in my class, but I'm the only black there and I feel like I should go back to my room.

It was a shock coming here. I rarely see another Hispanic student. I help make up the 1 percent. They accepted me, but I feel on the fringe.

[In one of my classes,] we were studying Maya Angelou, and some people were afraid of saying what they felt because I was in the room and they didn't want to offend me. Then there were others who, if I had been a violent person, I would have smacked them. I don't know what it is. I guess they just lump all persons of color [together] and think we follow the same path.

Stereotyping

In a conversation in my American politics class, I found myself confronting another student on a very stereotypical statement. Too many students look at what they see on TV or in the news and think "all blacks are that way."

White students think I must be rich to come here or that I must come from the ghetto. We're looked on as an exception—the stereotype black student does not go to college.

The only books (two) that are used in my American literature course that deal with blacks are stereotypically negative.

[In my classes,] when there are issues of poverty being discussed, people's heads start swiveling around to me even though they don't know if I'm poor or not. They see a connection between blacks and poverty, and I feel uncomfortable.

White students think that blacks are only here because of affirmative action.

I think [black students] really are suppressed. . . . I think in a way they're almost forced to take on the characteristics of the white population. . . . I don't feel that I know that much more about black people as a result of my friendship with them. I don't know if that's really what black culture is, that it isn't that different, or it's just because they don't feel comfortable expressing differences.

It really bugs me when black students use race or prejudice as an excuse for how they are acting.

Overload

You get into trying to fix things and you find yourself doing eight or nine things a night and you're supposed to be here to get an education and you can't do that because you're trying to change something. Where do you find the happy medium? . . . I'm at the point where I'm just tired [of trying] to deal with diversity and multicultural issues. I just get totally away from it. Does this mean that I'm no longer black, because I don't want to deal with it?

Too Few Role Models

The lack of a black faculty member hurts the school a lot.

I think a minority professor could relate to me better.

A minority professor could be a statement from [the] administration that their commitment to a multicultural campus is genuine.

I never thought I'd come here and feel different from the rest of the people. I thought I would be considered as a Latino, but as a person, and that they would understand my background and deal with me. . . . When you lose that [expectation], you need somebody to identify with, someone you can look up to, a role model. And if you look up to the faculty and administration, they're not there.

I've never had a teacher I could look up to and say, "I want to be like him or her." I would want a teacher of my background and culture so I could look up to that person and say, "Wow!"

Minority Concerns: Systemic or Separable?

Typically the first point of entry for administrators of color is to be hired by the institution in a single area—minority affairs. A prevailing view among these administrators is that their access and

advancement is limited to this area. In the words of one, minority affairs is "ghettoized" and not given a decision-making role in the institution as a whole.

> Minority affairs was developed by institutions to make sure things don't change.
>
> People want to pigeon-hole you.
>
> The ethnic groups on campus work together, but the administration is afraid. They need to be in control and fear that we're moving in.
>
> Another administrator expressed the opinion that administrators of color are on the campus largely to act as "buffers" between majority and minority interests and to "save" the institution from having to change in any significant way. One participant added, "At first the institution has enthusiasm for increasing minority participation, but after several years they are bored and unwilling to understand."

Does Standing Together Mean Staying Apart?

> [In classes] when issues such as perceptions of racism come up, it's never different groups—it's just blacks and whites. Examples are always black and white—there's no American Indians, Hispanics, Asians, at least in [Letters and Science] lectures whenever there's a need to cite an example. It bothered me. I felt [Latinos] were being ignored. Either that, or they made a connection that "Since you're both a minority in number, your concerns and needs are the same," when indeed we're different in many ways. . . . The course is [supposed to be about] "The Human Experience," and the human experience is not just black and white.
>
> Taking a black studies course is very important to me. I had decided that if I couldn't take one here, I'd go someplace else.

One to one just about any majority student can relate to a minority student. On a larger scale, I would guess that most of our majority students still feel intimidated.

Bewilderment, Confusion, Resentment by White Students

It is unlikely that all behavior by white students in the campus community that is found to be offensive and distressing to minority members of the community is prompted by prejudice or callous disregard. Some of it appears to result from genuine curiosity, some from confusion over how to behave, some from ignorance, and some from resentment over perceived special treatment of minority students.

We had a black secretary in our department who was stealing and had a chip on her shoulder. When we tried to tell our boss, he dismissed it as being prejudice. She was eventually replaced with another person who happens to be black. She is very well liked by her peers and very qualified for the job. Whenever there is conflict, racism is the first thing that's thought of.

If whites do not like a minority person, they are labeled "racist" right away.

It really bugs me when blacks use racism as a convenient excuse any time there is negative feedback.

Sometimes minorities get special treatment, and have more accessibility to supervisors. The university seems afraid to offend minorities.

Minorities get more than their fair share, and they still don't take advantage of the opportunities given them.

I'm so much more aware of races, it's almost like I'm becoming racist. [I find myself thinking things like] "OK, if this white person doesn't hold the door for me, she must be a racist." I'm so annoyed [that I'm starting to feel this way].

The Importance of Financial Aid

One of the values of the focus group project was that it provided strong testimonial evidence for the fact that student financial aid is a critically important factor in the recruitment and retention of minority students.

> Half of the students stated that the financial aid they received was the deciding factor in deciding to come to [this college].

> At first, my financial aid situation looked bleak. I also wanted to go into the service, and they still wanted me to come. They worked everything out.

Concluding Comments

A focus group facilitator commented on the experience of one campus in a way that summed up the overall message of the voluminous transcripts from the entire project.

> Those present spoke of at least three crucial needs in order to retain students of color: (1) change the learning environment; (2) provide sensitivity training in cultural diversity at all levels of the institution; and (3) offer mentoring programs.

There are undoubtedly exceptional situations where such institutional interventions are unnecessary. Yet the testimony of scores of students, faculty, and staff at independent institutions of all types throughout the country clearly suggests that concerted, thoughtful efforts are required to develop a climate that is positive, nurturing, and supportive for students of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

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